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LIFE

'Killer Cocktail' celebrates feminism amid controversial pro-choice battle



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It's the summer of 1977 in Chicago. An investigative TV reporter is covering the confrontation between a woman's health clinic fighting to preserve the right to choose and the equally ardent demonstrators fighting against that right.

Things take a dangerous turn when the clinic is violently attacked and a staff member loses her life.

Such is the premise of "Killer Cocktail" (Open Books), the third installment of the popular Emily Winter mystery series written by Palm Springs-based author David M. Hamlin.

As an early female broadcast reporter in the 1970s, the novel's protagonist, Winter, is a feminist and a breaker of the glass ceiling. She's not afraid of opposition — even when her life and her husband's life are threatened by a sniper — and she always manages to be one step ahead of her male colleagues despite the repeated setbacks she faces, most of which one can't help but attribute to the misogyny of the era.

It's an interesting character to come from a male writer. While men have long put women in lead or plot-driven roles — which one could argue is a form of feminism — Hamlin writes from a purely feminist perspective, making Winter's constant battle against an entrenched '70s sexism realistic and heartfelt.

While not based on a specific person, Hamlin says Winter epitomizes the traits of women he admired back in the day.

"I spent a good deal of time in the early 1970s with women quite like Emily Winter," he says. "That is, they were breaking into their professions. Some of them were quite strident and angry about the process. Others were a little more crafty and cunning, but I greatly admired

them all. And I wanted to celebrate that second wave of the post-suffragette wave of feminism."

Born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Bethesda, Maryland, Hamlin served with Volunteers in Service to America and graduated cum laude from Nason College in Maine. His first career was as an executive with the American Civil Liberties Union. His second was as a partner in a successful Los Angeles public relations and marketing agency, which he co-founded with his wife, Sydney Weisman.

In addition to mystery novels, Hamlin published a first-hand account of one of the ACLU's most controversial free speech cases, "The Nazi/Skokie Conflict" (Beacon Press), about a group of neo-Nazis fighting for the right to march through the Chicago suburb of Skokie where many Holocaust survivors lived. He is also the author of "Los Angeles' Original Farmers Market" (Arcadia Press) as well as countless opinion page commentaries, news articles and short stories.

Hamlin says writing is in his genes. "My late father was an editor-publisher of a reasonably popular niche magazine in the '40s and '50s called 'Aero Digest,' which was about the airline industry. My late brother was an editor and writer. I did some freelance work for alternate journals when I was in New Hampshire to supplement my income. I wrote for something called the 'Vermont Freeman' and sold a couple of stories to magazines in Maine and New Hampshire. So, I'd always been on the periphery of writing, and I'd always had it in mind that if I could ever spring free the time and the freedom to work in long form, I would seize that opportunity."

That opportunity came when after 30 years of running his and Weisman's public relations agency in Los Angeles, he decided to retire. ("I retired," he clarifies. "My wife still dabbles.")

"The first thing I wanted to do was dive into long-form fiction. And the very first project I created for myself was 'Winter in Chicago,' the first Emily Winter mystery."

Hamlin says his writing process is simple. "I start with a blank piece of paper, and I create a timeline. I start with: 'How does the case begin, how does it develop and how does it end?' And I have little jagged lines that go up and down from that timeline, which mark particular events that need to take place. From that point forward, I let the characters develop as they will. Sometimes I find surprises along the way."

The subject of "Killer Cocktail" seems especially topical at this moment in history, even though the novel takes place nearly 50 years ago. Did Hamlin ever imagine we'd once again

be seriously discussing a woman's right to choose?

"I'm sorry to say I did," he says, "because when I started thinking about that as the spine of the third Emily Winter book, I had to question: Is this topic still relevant? And it seemed to me very clear that the debate was not going to disappear anytime soon. I can't say I anticipated the astonishing decision this court made, but I was pretty confident the issue was not going to just grow quiet and go away.

"And because there is a deliberate feminist bent to the Emily Winter books, I thought this was a topic which fit right into that frame. And I also wanted to try and explore, in as balanced a way as I could, both sides of that debate."

As for his next project, Hamlin is between halfway and two-thirds done with a new novel. "This one is set in Palm Springs," he says. "The timeline is right. However, the characters haven't fully blossomed yet, so I've set it aside for a little while. But I expect I will get back to it."

All three Emily Winter books are available at open-bks.com as well as Amazon, Barnes & Noble and independent bookstores. For more on Hamlin, visit dmhwrites.com.

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